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The Ambassador and The CIA

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Once upon a time when the big trees were all little, as my father used to preface his bed-time stories, I was a deputy chief of mission in a large embassy presided over by a grizzled ambassador well past his sixtieth birthday. I was twenty years younger.

Though there was a certain mutual respect, the relationship between us was prickly. The generation gap was difficult to bridge. Now that I'm on his side of it, I'm more understanding. But this has come too late for practical consequences. The old ambassador went to the section of the happy hunting grounds reserved for diplomats many years ago. I remember him

A past contributor and member of the editorial board, Ray Thurston tells us he's glad to be back in the pages of the Journal. His Foreign Service career included posts in Canada, Europe, South Asia, Latin America and Africa as well as several stints on the banks of the Potomac. He was Ambassador to Haiti (1961-63) and to Somalia (1965-69). Since his retirement from the Service he has been active in international academic and related educational programs, principally in the exotic and uncharted realm of shipboard education for university undergraduates and older adults. Now only occasionally at sea, he leads for the most part a landlubber's life, alternating between a home in Florida on the Gulf of Mexico and one in Italy overlooking Lake Trasimeno. It was on the shores of the latter that Hannibal of Carthage decimated the Roman legions in 217 B.C. His wife, a native of Italy, is quick to point out that while Hannibal won the battle, he lost the war, a useful reminder for both soldiers and diplomats.

fondly with that bittersweet sentiment former adversaries have for each other. My memories of him take on an even greener hue when I read the latest CIA expose. One of our differences had to do with the extensive operations of our so-called spooks in the country in which we served.

It was—and is—a very small country both in size and population. The bulk of it is an odd-sized peninsula, but it holds sway over detached pieces of real estate called glorious isles by romantic poets and piles of rock and gravel by at least one down-to-earth Marine guard in the embassy at the time.

These rock piles had seen a lot of history and had figured prominently in the seminal origins of Western civilization. More to the point, they had become after World War II a testing ground in the struggle to contain the expansionist crusade of the Muscovites and their fiefs.

So it was not surprising in the middle 1950s, when the ambassador and I were working in tandem together in this mythical yet real kingdom, to find the CIA all over the place. They were in the embassy proper, in the economic and military aid missions, in the military attache staffs and God knows where else, all with the enthusiastic cooperation and support of our official hosts who were glad

to have us on their side. By the way, they had a remarkable national penchant for the skulduggery surrounding intelligence operations.

It follows that the CIA boys and girls had a ball. Quite apart from the easy pickings locally, there were nearby areas in which their writ ran. They were also enjoying the prestigious fruits of recent happenings in Iran and Guatemala. Their big boss, Allen Dulles, would drop in occasionally in his converted C-54; he'd had part of the interior screened off as a bedroom featuring a large double bed and adjacent bookshelves brimming with reading material in which to browse on his frequent global travels. I was impressed.

Kermit Roosevelt, another CIA luminary, would also pass through. He had a provocative way of depreciating the efficacy of traditional diplomacy in contrast to the successes achieved by CIA methods. It was a little hard to take.

My ambassador was no slouch as a cold warrior. We shared a common aversion to Kremlin tactics and objectives. But his talents and tastes ran to the tried and true, narrow paths of diplomacy. He was, moreover, accustomed from his years as a pre-World War II diplomat to the comfortable intimacy of small missions in which an ambassador or minister was the head of a family of two or three diploma-